

FRIGHT TIME

3 Spine-tingling Tales for Young Readers

- HOTEL HORROR
- IT'S REALLY ME!
- CREEP COUNTY



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HOTEL HORROR

by Mark Valadez

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I felt the seaplane touch down on the water at the edge of Butternut Key. I could see my great-uncle Jack standing on the wharf, waving his arms.

I'd been looking forward to this trip the whole school year. It was what kept me going through Mrs. Deverson's super-intense pop quizzes in Honors Math. My reward for all that brain-draining hard work stretched out before me now—an amazing stretch of blue and green ocean, and white sandy beaches dotted with palm trees.

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I'd promised my best friend Chris I'd drop him a line from the Florida Keys. Chris was green with envy. He was spending another summer at Camp Wauconda back home in New Jersey—home of icky green swimming pools and poison ivy.

I stepped off the plane, loaded down with baggage, and squinted in the bright sunlight. Before I knew what was happening, Uncle Jack blotted out the sun in front of me and pushed a pair of sunglasses into my free hand. "Better put these on, my boy. You're not exactly in New Jersey anymore."

My great-uncle Jack is quite the joker, always good for games of touch football and knee-slapping funny stories at family picnics. He'd been away the last couple of years, having moved to Florida to start a business.

That was part of the reason I was here. It wasn't going to be all fun in the sun. Uncle Jack was renovating an old hotel called The Seafarer's Inn and was about to open it up to the public.

Dad had asked me if I'd like to spend my summer vacation in Florida to help Uncle Jack. I

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jumped at the chance. Outside of a single trip to New York to see the Empire State Building, I'd barely been out of New Jersey my whole life.

We piled my luggage into the back of the jeep, then sped off, cruising along the coastline. The Seafarer's Inn was way at the other end of the island.

Uncle Jack popped in one of his classical music tapes, while I stared out at the passing scenery.

Uncle Jack pointed toward an elevated stretch of roadway looming on the horizon. "And that's the Overseas Highway."

It took us less than half an hour to reach the inn. "Butternut Key isn't very big, is it?" I said to my uncle.

Uncle Jack chuckled. "I suppose New Jersey could beat us in a war." He parked the jeep on the beach and said, "All right, we're here. Let's move 'em out."

The Seafarer's Inn was like some great building from the past; a three-story white stucco house with an orange Spanish tile roof, giant palm trees growing on both sides. I knew from Uncle Jack's letters that the place was very old.

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It had stood for more than a hundred years.

Uncle Jack had sent us "before" pictures. In them, the place had looked downright awful, overgrown with vines and fungus, and littered with trash. Most of the shutters on the front windows were broken, the roof had a hole in it, and the stucco was cracked and crumbling. Some of my relatives had shaken their heads. "Crazy Jack, trying to make lemonade out of lemon seeds."

I only wished they could see it now. It was obvious a lot of hard work had gone into the place since those first pictures were taken. Fresh paint, new roof, green lawn and trimmed shrubs. The place had been totally rehabbed. My heart swelled looking at it. I was proud of Uncle Jack.

"You haven't seen anything yet, Curt, my boy," Uncle Jack said. "This is just a facelift. Wait until you see what we've done to the inside."

A crew of workmen in front were preparing to erect a new sign, a large, glossy wooden plaque bearing the words THE SEAFARER'S INN in fancy old-style lettering. The sign was draped in a length of fishing net and decorated with hand-painted swordfish and other assorted nautical imagery.